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# The Value of Mentoring

03/12/2015 03:46 pm ET Updated May 12, 2015



Businesswoman and businessman in discussion at office conference room table

Someone once said that the great thing about golf is that you get immediate feedback after every shot. For some of us, the feedback is brutal and routinely includes the words “slice” and “hook.” But you can’t deny the value of instantly knowing how well you did.

Wouldn’t it be great if we had a process in life or work to get this kind of accurate feedback?

Well, there is, sort of. It’s called mentoring.

About 20 years ago, I was experiencing some stress in my life and wanted to do a better job of managing that stress. So, I sought the help of a counselor who encouraged me to make a number of positive changes. Two of those changes led to the assistance of a nutritionist and a personal trainer to get my body into better shape.

Today, I am mentally fit and have the body of a 53 year old — even though I’m 54.

This is the value of mentoring.

Let’s be honest. We are not always the best judge of our abilities. We tend to have blind spots. I remember hearing someone once say, “No matter where I go, the world’s worst drivers follow me there.”

And of course, all of those drivers are thinking the same about him.

On several occasions over the years, I've conducted a simple management survey and similarly, the vast majority of the managers rated themselves as "above average." Now, if you know anything about the Bell Curve, you realize this is impossible. The majority of us fall into the "average" range but there must also be a certain number of folks in the "below average" range in order to make those who are in the "above average" range even possible. But now, we're getting into statistics and I was just a psychology major.

So, what does any of this have to do with mentoring?

Mentoring allows us to accurately evaluate our skills, to see our blind spots and to determine a plan for improvement. And isn't that a worthy goal for both our professional *and* our personal endeavors?

During my career, I've sought mentors for all kinds of help with stress management, business development, writing, humor, presentation skills, nutrition, physical fitness, and personal accountability. In fact, I've been accused of being over-mentored. I may actually need to seek a mentor to help me with my mentoring. But, I do this because I find great value in the counsel of wiser and more experienced people.

As I've mentioned before, my social work training is the reason for my views on mentoring. Social work is one of the few professions that requires mentoring, or supervision as we call it, for accreditation and licensure. The belief is that when we're working with people in emotional situations, it helps to have a third person who makes sure we are maintaining our objectivity and not being impaired by our blind spots.

So, how might mentoring benefit you?

Whatever your responsibilities, you can learn from those with more experience. If you're in a new job, you can learn from the people who have been there a while. If you're in a leadership role, you can get valuable advice from seasoned leaders. Even if you're a parent, you can get input from other parents who have learned from their own experience. Mentoring is valuable for both professional *and* personal development.

Here are three things to consider when seeking a mentor:

**Find the Right Fit.** It's important that our mentors fit both our development needs and our personality. The same is true for people looking for a counselor or therapist. We must feel comfortable with someone before we're willing to open up and discuss sensitive issues. So, do your homework and perhaps even "test drive" a few people to find the best fit.

**Determine your Goals for Mentoring.** Before we can benefit from a mentor, we need to understand how to use them. For instance, if you're looking for a leadership mentor, you must figure out your leadership needs. Are you looking to improve your strategic planning skills, your supervisory skills, or perhaps your presentation skills? Once you know your goals, you can make the most of the time with your mentor. However, we must also be open to changing our goals as we uncover more opportunities for growth.

**Pay for it if Necessary.** Sometimes, we can find a mentor who will help us for free. Sometimes, we may be able to barter with someone and trade professional services. But sometimes, we

must pay for the mentoring. Most of the times I have sought a coach or mentor, I've paid them for their time. It may seem like a lot of money, but the investment is definitely worth it. Golf looks easy. We're just hitting a ball with a stick. Life is like that. We see everyone else doing it and it seems like it's not that hard. But to truly succeed in life and work, we need help. Just like every pro golfer has a coach, we can benefit from a coach or mentor in both our life and work. In fact, our success depends on it.